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LONDON

A Soviet diplomat who defected to the west in Iran and is now in England is a top spy for his country, the Daily Mail tabloid reported Saturday.

The defection of Vladimir Kuzichkin, 35, a vice-consul in the Soviet's Tehran embassy at the time, was "the biggest spy scoop for more than 10 years," the tabloid said.

Eleven years ago the British government expelled 105 Soviet officials for spying and said its evidence had come from Oleg Laylin, a KGB intelligence agent who had defected to the West.

The British Home Office announced late Friday that Kuzichkin had arrived in Britain and been granted permission to stay. The Home Office did not confirm the report that he was a top Soviet spy.

A Home Office spokesman said the defection was not being treated as a "run-of-the-mill" affair but declined to elaborate. However, the Daily Mail quoted an unnamed British intelligence officer as saying Kuzichkin was "top of his class in the KGB."

The Observer newspaper, however, raised a note of caution, saying, "an unusually large number of gaps and inconsistencies mark reports of the defection of Valdimir Andreyevich Kuzichkin."

The liberal weekly said the mystery "surrounds Kuzichkin's movements since last June, when his car was said to have been found abandoned in a Tehran street.

"His diplomatic passport ...would have enabled him to leave Iran fairly easily. But if he left in June, why is he only now being interrogated?"

The Observer said that from previous experience, "a likely explanation is that Kuzichkin has spent the intervening period in the United States being interrogated by the CIA."

The Sunday tabloid News of the World said in a front-page article that the Soviet had been won over by a British woman agent in Tehran. The newspaper, citing unnamed British intelligence officers, said he had been working for months as a double agent for the British feeding information to London but became frightened and was persuaded by the unnamed woman to defect.

The Sunday Telegraph, a Conservative weekly, said Kuzichkin was a senior official in the KGB's "ultra-secret 'Directorate S' which controls the activities of Soviet nationals planted as 'illegal' agents abroad."

The Sunday Times said that after his defection the Iranian government rounded up a number of top leaders of the underground Tudeh communist party.

The Guardian, a highly respected London daily newspaper, said Kuzichkin was being questioned intensively by British intelligence officers at his hiding

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